

## SAKALAVA DIVINATION

*by William J. G. Gardenier*

The Sakalava are a group of pastoralists inhabiting the western plains of Madagascar. Their country stretches some 1100 kilometers north to south over almost the entire length of the island and extends approximately 150 kilometers inland from the Mozambique Channel to the fringes of the central High Plateau. Recent writings on the Sakalava include accounts of their system of divination (*sikily*)<sup>1</sup> by Decary (1970) for the Sakalava of the North and by Rabedimy (1976) as it applies to the southern Sakalava. While these works deal extensively with the mechanics of divination, they do not examine the sociological implications of the results.

This paper treats both facets. First it explains how the Central Sakalava of Besalamy and surroundings<sup>2</sup> use divination to determine the cause of disease. It then demonstrates that diagnoses are most frequently in terms of witchcraft or sorcery but that clues to the exact identity of evil-doers are likely to change from one consultation to the next. Thus, in a series of divinations pertaining to the same patient over a period of time, suspicions rarely remain fixed on only one or a few individuals. This situation is remarkably different from that in most other African societies, which heavily rely on beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery to explain misfortune. In these societies suspicions and accusations contribute to the formation of factions while intensifying the hostility between factions already in existence. Sakalava<sup>3</sup> divination, on the other hand, by diffusing suspicions, helps avoid factionalism.

### THE MECHANICS OF DIVINATION

The stock-in-trade of a diviner is a quantity of approximately 150

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seeds from a tree called Fany. These seeds are circular, approximately one centimeter in diameter and one to two millimeters thick. Neither of the two sides of a seed is in any way distinctive. From the edge towards the center the thickness of a seed decreases so that a seed has the appearance of a miniature saucer.

In preparation for a consultation the diviner, sitting on the floor, puts his seeds in front of him. Then, moving his hand in a circular motion through the seeds to mix them, he asks the divination system to disclose the reason for the sickness of his client or the person on whose behalf the client came to consult him, such as a spouse or a child.

After the invocation the diviner divides the seeds into four piles of approximately equal size. Starting with one of these small piles he removes seeds two by two until either one or two seeds are left (in other words, he determines whether the pile is odd or even). These one or two seeds he puts in the upper right hand position of an imaginary four-by-four matrix. Repeating the process with the second pile again yields one or two seeds, which are entered in the position under the first one. After all four piles have thus been treated the right hand column of the imaginary four-by-four matrix is filled. Now all remaining seeds are amassed and again divided into four little piles. These are treated as before and yield the second column of the matrix. After this entire process is repeated four times the matrix is complete. The formation of the matrix of odd/even seeds is governed by chance, equivalent to flipping a coin to determine the pattern. The resulting arrangement of seeds will be called a *key*. The total number of keys that can be constructed this way equals 65536 ( $2^{16}$ ). An example of a key is shown in figure 1a.

Given a key, the rest of the configuration is laid out using precise rules that do not involve any chance factors. The rules are listed in table 1. Figure 1b shows the complete configuration resulting from the key of figure 1a. Competent diviners do not normally lay out columns five through eight. The usual form of a configuration is as shown in figure 1c.

The twelve columns of figure 1c are all named. The same holds for rows five through eight and rows seventeen through twenty-four. Additions of certain rows and/or columns are also named. A named column, row, or addition of rows and/or columns will be referred to as a *house*. A complete listing of houses is given in table 2.

Basically, divination is a method of partitioning the list of table 2 and arranging the houses in a number of clusters. Each cluster tells a story depending on the houses it contains and the meaning associated with each house. While most of these meanings are straightforward, a few are

a Key.

4	3	2	1
o o	o o	o o	o o
o o	o	o o	o
o o	o	o o	o o
o o	o	o o	o

b The entire configuration resulting from key "a."

8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
o	o o	o	o o	o o	o o	o o	o o
o o	o o	o o	o o	o o	o	o o	o
o	o	o	o o	o o	o	o o	o o
o o	o o	o o	o o	o o	o	o o	o
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
o	o o	o	o o 17	21 o o	o o	o o	o o
o o	o o	o o	o o 18	22 o	o o	o	o
o o	o	o	o o 19	23 o	o	o o	o o
o o	o o	o o	o o 20	24 o	o o	o	o

c The usual working form of "b."

9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
o	o o	o	o o 17	21 o o	o o	o o	o o
o o	o o	o o	o o 18	22 o	o o	o	o
o o	o	o	o o 19	23 o	o	o o	o o
o o	o o	o o	o o 20	24 o	o o	o	o

The numbers correspond to the first twenty-four houses listed in table 2. Each number appears closest to the first position in a house. Thus, for example: house number 1 is read from top to bottom, house number 5 is read from right to left, house number 17 is read from right to left, house number 21 is read from left to right.

FIG. 1. EXAMPLE OF A KEY AND ITS DERIVATIVE CONFIGURATION

somewhat ambiguous. The sixth house, for example, stands for dirt or sadness bordering on anger. Which meaning is appropriate depends on context. In the context of food, dirt is appropriate, in conjunction with a third party the meaning is usually anger. The twelfth house stands for god, bush, a feature of nature, spirit possession, and surprise. If there is any reason to let this house stand for spirit possession the other possibilities are ignored. For instance, if the interrogator is the regular medium of a spirit, then the joint occurrence in one cluster of house numbers one (assuming the

TABLE 1  
RULES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ENTIRE  
CONFIGURATION STARTING FROM A KEY

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Column number

1	}	key
2		
3		
4		
5		first row of the key read from right to left
6		second row of the key read from right to left
7		third row of the key read from right to left
8		fourth row of the key read from right to left
9		columns 7 + 8
11		columns 5 + 6
10		columns 9 + 11
13		columns 3 + 4
15		columns 1 + 2
14		columns 13 + 15
12		columns 10 + 14
16		columns 1 + 12

Example of addition of columns:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 7 & + & 8 & = & 9 \\
 \circ & \circ & & \circ & & \circ \\
 \circ & \circ & \circ & \circ & \circ & \circ \\
 & \circ & & \circ & \circ & \circ \\
 \circ & \circ & \circ & \circ & \circ & \circ
 \end{array}$$

The sum of the first entries of columns 7 and 8 is odd and is represented by one seed in the first position of column 9. Similarly, the sum of the second entries of columns 7 and 8 is even and is represented by two seeds in the second position of column 9, and so forth.

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interrogator is male) and twelve is interpreted as possession of the interrogator by his spirit. The other meanings associated with house number twelve are considered too vague to be of immediate consequence. The thirteenth house stands for cemetery, an ancestral spirit, or an old person. By considering houses twenty-eight (cemetery, ancestral spirit) and twenty-nine (old person), it becomes often clear whether the thirteenth house refers to the dead or the living. The names of houses nineteen and twenty-three differ only in the first word, which in both cases stands for woman or girl. In actual consultations no difference was detected between the meaning attached to these two houses. The thirty-fourth house carries two divergent

TABLE 2  
LIST OF HOUSES

The first twenty-four houses can be read directly from a configuration (see figure 1c).

HOUSE NUMBER	NAME	MEANING
1	Tale	male interrogator or husband of female interrogator
2	Maly	cattle, wealth
3	Fahatelo	a third person (usually assumed to be male)
4	Belady	earth
5	Fianaha	child
6	Abily	dirt, sadness bordering on anger
7	Alisay	female interrogator or wife of male interrogator
8	Fahavalo	disease
9	Fahasivy	medicine
10	Moasy	medicine man
11	Haja	food
12	Haky	god, bush, feature of nature, spirit possession, surprise
13	Sorota	cemetery, ancestral spirit, old person
14	Saily	relative
15	Lala	road
16	Akiba	house
17	Vy	steel, iron
18	Olo raty	untrustworthy person (usually assumed to be male)
19	Zavavy am traño hafa	woman in a different house
20	Sasapöna	ineffective action
21	Vola	talk
22	Voriky	sorcery
23	Alisay am traño hafa	woman in a different house
24	Hafalia	to be happy

The remaining houses involve additions of other houses as indicated:

25	Tolaky	10 + 3	witchcraft
26	Töky	11 + 8	alcoholic beverage
27	Maty aho	12 + 4	I will die
28	Sorota maty	13 + 4	cemetery, ancestral spirit
29	Sorota velo	13 + 5	old person
30	Alokiny olo maty	13 + 3	open-air morgue
31	Maty tampoky	14 + 3	sudden death
32	Miopaky	16 + 1	weak as the result of illness
33	Neñiny	12 + 15	regret
34	Miveriny	11 + 15	return, lost
35	Menga	9 + 16	leave
36	Saokiarety	9 + 8	disease which has taken hold of someone
37	Ha veloma	11 + 4	the person will live
38	Larobia	9 + 10	Wednesday
39	Kamisy	10 + 11	Thursday
40	Zoma	11 + 12	Friday
41	Sabotsy	12 + 13	Saturday
42	Alahady	13 + 14	Sunday
43	Tinainy	14 + 15	Monday
44	Fandraava	15 + 16	Tuesday
45	Fanjava	12 + 2	money

meanings. The name of the house sounds related to the verb *miverina* (to return), but the sound also suggests the word *very* (lost).

Two houses in the list refer to wizardry, of which the Sakalava distinguish two types. The first type, termed *voriky*, involves substances imbued with evil forces and is represented by house twenty-two. This type of wizardry corresponds to what Middleton and Winter define as sorcery—"evil magic against others"—which, they note, in Africa usually takes the form of "medicines" (1963:3). The second, *tolaky*, represented by house twenty-five, fits Middleton and Winter's definition of witchcraft—"a mystical and innate power which can be used by its possessor to harm other people" (1963:3).

To see how the list of houses of table 2 is divided up in clusters, note that in an actual consultation the various houses of the configuration are occupied by elementary divination patterns. For instance, house number three of figure 1 is occupied by the elementary divination pattern two-one-one-one. There are a total of sixteen elementary divination patterns. These patterns are arranged in five groups, three of which correspond to three of the cardinal points of the compass, while the remaining two are "located" in the west. The elementary divination patterns and their groupings are shown in figure 2.

Once a configuration has been laid out, divination proceeds as follows: The diviner notes the house associated with the divinatory problem and the group of the elementary divination pattern occupying this house. For example, if the client is a male who came to ask about his own health, divination will be centered on the first house. This house is occupied by an elementary divination pattern belonging to a certain group. In the example of figure 1 this is group West". The diviner then scans the rest of the configuration and notes other houses associated with house number one. A list results. The list under West" in table 3 refers to the example of figure 1.

Such a list of houses forms the basis of interpretation. In general, the diviner starts by scanning only the first twenty-four houses of his configuration. These are the houses that are immediately visible and do not have to be calculated. This leads to a partial list. In the example of table 3, the partial list of group West" includes all houses from the top, down to and including house number seventeen. If a partial list provides sufficient information to answer the question of the interrogator, no more houses are examined. Otherwise other evidence is admitted. In particular, the first additional house to be examined is house number twenty-five, which stands for witchcraft.

The partial list in group West" of table 3 does not include information related to disease. Upon examining additional houses, the diviner concludes that the interrogator (1) is the victim of witchcraft (25). Searching for the

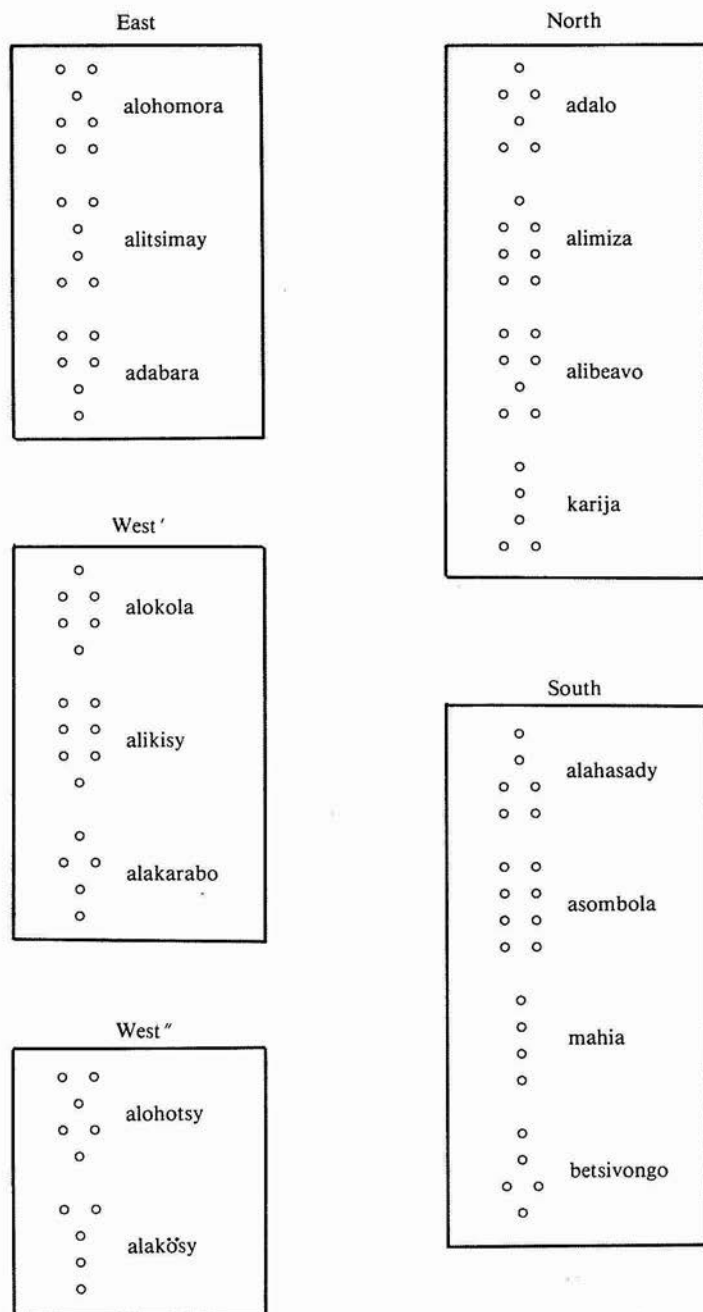


FIG. 2. ELEMENTARY DIVINATION PATTERNS

evil-doer, he notices that the list includes a third person (3), and an old person (13, 29). These two denotations are merged and interpreted to mean that the culprit is an old person. The list of houses originates in the west, further narrowing down the category to which the witchcraft practitioner belongs—he lives west of the victim. The act of witchcraft took place either on a Saturday (41), Sunday (42), or Monday (43). The victim will die a sudden death (31) if nothing is done to remedy the situation.

The rest of the information is somewhat ambiguous. Cemetery (28) may be taken to mean the place where the victim ends up if nothing is done. Its inclusion may also be interpreted to mean that the act of witchcraft took place during a funeral or a second funeral, or that the witchcraft practitioner came from a funeral or second funeral and while passing (15) the house (16) of the victim committed his evil act. Steel (17) is most likely connected to the machete of the evil-doer (virtually all Sakalava males carry machetes at all times; women often carry pocket knives). Regret (33) obviously refers to the feelings of the victim.

Suppose the client comes to ask about his child (5). In that case the diviner observes that house number five is occupied by an elementary divination pattern belonging to the southern group (see figure 1). The entire list of houses occupied by members of this group is shown in table 3. The houses that are immediately visible do not involve sickness. It is only when house number thirty-two is examined that disease becomes relevant to the group. The interpretation is that on a Tuesday (44) an untrustworthy person (18) and a woman (23)—presumably husband and wife—who live to the south of the child prayed (21) to god (12) and earth (4), probably to make the child sick. Their action was not as effective (20) as they had hoped. The weak condition (32) of the child comes (34) and goes (35). The child is afraid it may die (27). This would give rise to the slaughtering of cattle (2) and the consumption of alcoholic beverages (26) at an open-air morgue (30). Money (45) would be given to the bereaved relatives. An alternative interpretation is that the prayer (4, 12, and 21) took place at an open-air morgue (30) where the evil-doers (18 and 23) were gathered at the occasion of another person's death.

If the consultation concerns a female client, the diviner refers to the northern group (see figure 1 and table 3). The woman (7) is sick (8) because a relative (14) who lives to the north of the victim has added something dirty (6) to her food (11). With the aid of medicine (9) from a medicine man (10), she will recover (37). Additional information underscores the disease (36) of the victim. The evil act took place on a Wednesday (38), Thursday (39), or Friday (40). An alternative interpretation is that when she went to a medicine man (10)—a relative (14) living north of her—for a medicine (9), the medicine man added something dirty (6) to make her sick (8 and 36).



TABLE 3  
GROUPINGS OF HOUSES BELONGING TO THE  
CONFIGURATION OF FIGURE 1

WEST\*

- 1 male interrogator or husband of female interrogator
- 3 a third person
- 13 cemetery, ancestral spirit, old person
- 15 road
- 16 house
- 17 steel, iron
- 25 witchcraft
- 28 cemetery, ancestral spirit
- 29 old person
- 31 sudden death
- 33 regret
- 41 Saturday
- 42 Sunday
- 43 Monday

SOUTH

- 2 cattle, wealth
- 4 earth
- 5 child
- 12 god, bush, feature of nature, spirit possession, surprise
- 18 untrustworthy person
- 20 ineffective action
- 21 talk
- 23 woman in a different house
- 26 alcoholic beverage
- 27 I will die
- 30 open-air morgue
- 32 weak as the result of illness
- 34 return, lost
- 35 leave
- 44 Tuesday
- 45 money

NORTH

- 6 dirt, sadness bordering on anger
- 7 female interrogator or wife of male interrogator
- 8 disease
- 9 medicine
- 10 medicine man
- 11 food
- 14 relative
- 36 disease which has taken hold of someone
- 37 the person will live
- 38 Wednesday
- 39 Thursday
- 40 Friday

EAST

- 19 woman in a different house

WEST\*

- 22 sorcery
- 24 to be happy

Sometimes, after examining the entire list of houses associated with house number one (assuming a male patient), the diviner finds that disease is not relevant to the group. Yet the interrogator may be severely ill. This discrepancy is explained by saying that divination does not always focus on the present. Sometimes it focuses on events of the past, at other times it predicts the future. In fact, configurations that seem irrelevant to the problem at hand can often be related to past events. Similarly, a person may find himself in a present situation that matches a past consultation. Such instances help support the credibility of divination.

When a group is not represented among the first sixteen houses, it is said that the ancestors are lost (*raza very*). In the example of table 3 this condition applies to groups East and West'. One might expect this to mean that the ancestors are truly lost, but in practice, whether one or more groups are absent from the first sixteen houses is often not even noticed, or if noticed, is largely ignored.

When a group is represented by only one of the first sixteen houses, special significance is attached to this fact. This is the only situation in which the elementary divination pattern itself is deemed important. For example, if Alohomora occupies the eighth house and no other houses among the first sixteen are occupied by members of the eastern group, this is interpreted favorably. The forces associated with this pattern could be tapped and used in preparing anti-sorcery medicine. In an actual consultation this is never done. Instead, the pattern, after being noted, is simply ignored. If a diviner needs to tap such forces he lays out a key that he remembers gives rise to the pattern desired. He then puts sand on the individual seeds of the pattern and simply collects the sand, which is now ready to be used as an ingredient in anti-sorcery medicine.

If, for another example, the eleventh house is held by Alohomora and no more representatives of the eastern group are among the first sixteen houses of a configuration, a negative interpretation follows. This particular case is called "bitter food, bitter water." The negative forces associated with this pattern have to be tapped with sand and thrown away in water in an eastern direction lest they harm the interrogator.

#### THE OUTCOME OF DIVINATION

Figure 3 shows ten keys drawn at random from the universe of all possible keys. These ten keys were presented one by one to a diviner, asking him to construct the rest of the configuration and to interpret the results. Specifically, the diviner was asked to concentrate in turn on houses one (male interrogator or husband of female interrogator), five (child), and seven (female interrogator or wife of male interrogator), and in each case to try to determine the cause of his or her disease and the

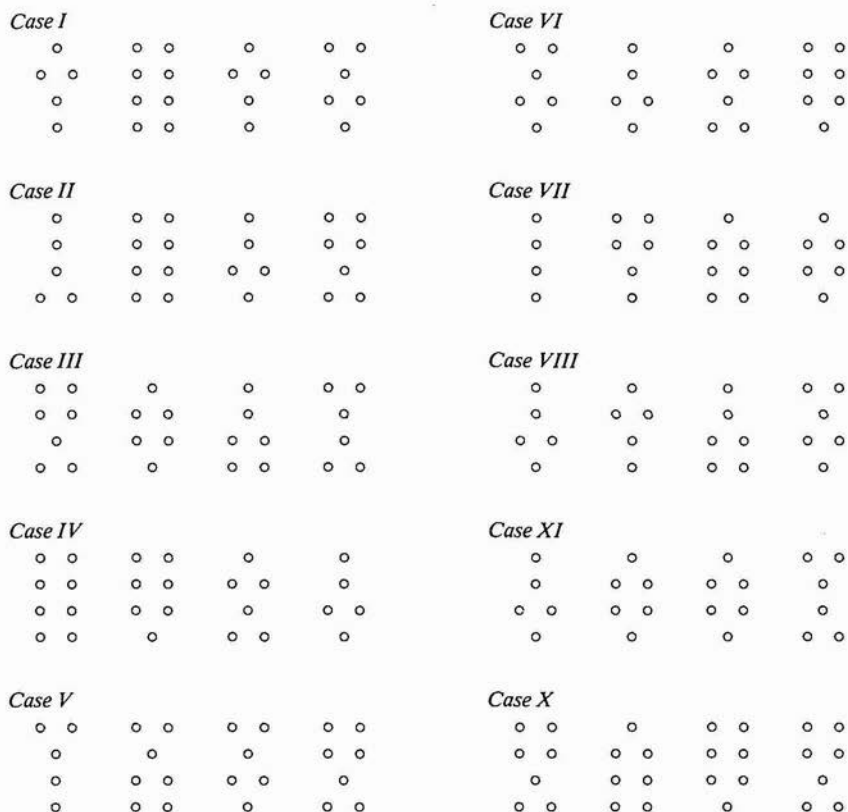


FIG. 3. RANDOM SAMPLE OF KEYS

identity of the evil-doer (for example: relative/non-relative, male/female).

Table 4 summarizes the results. Each case gave rise to three consultations, one each for the man, the child, and the woman, so that the ten cases represent a total of thirty consultations. Half of these are of undetermined cause. Of the other fifteen, only four involve supernatural agents, while the rest show human agents at work.

The relative unimportance of supernatural agents in effecting disease also follows from the vague descriptions of houses twelve (god, bush, feature of nature, spirit possession, surprise) and thirteen (cemetery, ancestral spirit, old person) in table 2. If these houses were more important in divining the cause of disease, one would expect much sharper definitions.

The eleven consultations that point to human agents as causing disease involve eight instances of sorcery, three of witchcraft, and none of pur-

TABLE 4  
SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM THE SAMPLE OF DIVINATION KEYS

CAUSE OF	CASE	I			II			III			IV			V			VI			VII			VIII			IX			X			TOTALS
DISEASE	HOUSE	1	5	7	1	5	7	1	5	7	1	5	7	1	5	7	1	5	7	1	5	7	1	5	7	1	5	7				
Human agent		x	x	x		x		x		x	x	x							x			x		x		x			11			
sorcery		x	x	x		x		x		x									x								x		8			
witchcraft														x								x			x				3			
dirt																													0			
relative		x	x	x		x		x		x									x								x		8			
non-relative														x								x							2			
undetermined relationship																										x			1			
male														x								x					x		3			
female													x							x									2			
undermined sex		x	x	x		x		x																	x				6			
Supernatural agent											x	x					x		x										4			
god and earth											x	x							x										3			
spirit possession																	x												1			
ancestors																													0			
Undetermined cause					x	x		x	x					x	x		x	x				x	x	x		x	x		15			

poseful contamination of food with dirt. As before, the unimportance of purposeful contamination of food with dirt as a cause of disease seems related to the ambiguity in the description of house six (dirt, sadness bordering on anger). No such ambiguity is present in the definition of house twenty-two (sorcery) or twenty-five (witchcraft).

Witchcraft is relatively less important in the divinations than sorcery. In part this may be because witchcraft occurs less frequently than sorcery in groupings associated with houses number one (male), five (child), or seven (woman). But even if it is assumed that witchcraft and sorcery occur with equal frequency in conjunction with houses one, five or seven, the mechanics of divination still favor sorcery. The elementary divination pattern occupying the house that stands for sorcery is immediately visible in a configuration. On the other hand, the elementary divination pattern occupying the house representing witchcraft has to be found by the addition of patterns occupying two other houses. For this reason witchcraft sometimes goes unnoticed. In particular, if sorcery and witchcraft appear in the same grouping, after the diviner notices that sorcery is involved, he will not check on witchcraft.

Turning to the identity of the human agent, we find him to be a relative in eight out of eleven instances. Only two evil-doers were identified as non-relatives, and in one case the relationship remained unknown. All eight cases with relatives involved sorcery. The three cases with human agents not identified as relatives all involved witchcraft.

The association of sorcery with relatives and of witchcraft with non-relatives agrees with Sakalava notions about wizardry (see below). An additional observation along the same lines follows from the definition of house twenty-five (see table 2). This house, which stands for witchcraft, is obtained by the addition of houses three (a third person) and ten (a medicine man). Thus, witchcraft is associated with the magical knowledge of outsiders.

As for the sex of the human agent, we notice that three times the agents were said to be male, twice they were female, while in six instances both males and females were involved. Thus in our sample men and women are represented with approximately equal frequency.

#### WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY AS CAUSES OF DISEASE

In the previous section we saw that sorcery is often associated with relatives, while witchcraft usually involves non-relatives. In popular beliefs about witchcraft and sorcery these same distinctions are also made, but here again the distinction is not absolute, as the same individual may engage in either.

Sakalava ideas about sorcery are quite explicit. It is thought, for example, that an evil-doer puts dangerous substances into someone's food or leaves such substances in the latter's house. At the same time beneficent magical substances can be used to counter the ill effects of sorcery or for future protection.

Sakalava concepts about witchcraft are less clear. Witchcraft involves mystical and innate powers, but the emphasis is not as much on these as it is on the distance of operation. Sorcery presupposes proximity. The sorcerer has to be able to put something in one's food or drink, or to leave something in one's house. All the witchcraft practitioner has to do is look, especially when his victim is eating or, worse yet, drinking an alcoholic beverage. At the moment the food or drink is passing through a person's throat a witchcraft practitioner, simply by looking, can transform it into a very dangerous, even lethal, substance.

This difference in distance of operation reflects the closeness of the relationship between evil-doer and victim. In sorcery the two parties involved are either related, or if not related, then at least on close enough terms that they occasionally meet and talk to each other. The two parties in witchcraft, on the other hand, may be complete strangers to each other and usually are. All that is required is that the evil-doer steal a glance in the direction of his victim while the latter is swallowing food or liquids.

It is significant that alcoholic beverages are considered especially dangerous as raw material for witchcraft practitioners. Alcohol consumption is associated with ceremonies. Many ceremonies are public occasions drawing many people, not all of whom are related. At such ceremonies, people who are complete strangers to each other often find themselves drinking in each other's company. This is the standard situation that is thought to give rise to witchcraft.

The conceptual difference between sorcery and witchcraft is constantly reinforced by divination. This reinforcement does not involve the opinions of the participants. But once the blame for the misfortune has been pinned on either witchcraft or sorcery and the direction of origin has been ascertained, personal opinions are allowed to play a role in the actual identification of the culprit.

Take sorcery as an example. When the diviner proclaims that the evil-doer is a male who lives to the south of the victim, the latter will not blame just anybody who belongs to this category. Instead, the victim will fix the blame on someone who he believes harbors ill feelings toward him. Such ill feelings are usually traced back to past arguments and fights.

The suspicions of an individual never remain focused on one or only a few persons. If the individual consults a diviner several times in a row,

he will probably find that from one consultation to the next the person who is causing him harm lives in a different quadrant of the compass. Moreover, information about the sex of the evil-doer or the day the evil act took place, and so forth, introduces additional variability. In the long run, these chance factors randomize the choices an individual makes from the total field of possible suspects. It ensures that the blame will not repeatedly be fixed on the same individual.

Accusations are never made openly. Because of the randomizing effect of the divination process, many members of a community at one time or other have been under suspicion by other members. But with divination being so common, new apprehensions are constantly introduced, so that alliances based on old suspicions are not likely to crystallize. In discussing the lack of accusations of wizardry among the Pedi of South Africa, Basil Sansom, identifying a situation similar to that among the Sakalava, explains: "The accuser will not address himself to an audience already divided into familiar factions or parties. He can have no surety of support and, without support, his accusations become but a personal declaration of belief in another's enmity towards him" (1972:221). At the same time an accusation of sorcery is a grave insult. Already being convinced of the other person's ill feelings, the accuser would not want to add oil to the fire, as this would surely cause the culprit to step up his evil practices.

Much of what has been said about sorcery also holds for witchcraft, the major difference being the question of motivation. Unlike sorcery, witchcraft is usually associated with non-relatives and strangers. The motivations of strangers are unknowable, and one does not know how to avoid inciting their wrath. This makes strangers particularly dangerous.

When through divination a patient has learned that he is the victim of sorcery or witchcraft, he will ask the diviner to give him medicine to counter the ill effects. Most competent diviners know how to make anti-wizardry medicine. Essentially it involves the tapping of the beneficent forces associated with favorable divination patterns, as described above. The patient is given the sand charged with the beneficent forces in question, together with twigs, leaves, and pieces of bark of certain plants and trees. Upon reaching home the patient adds these substances to water, brings the water to a boil, and prepares a brew. Depending on the instruction of the diviner, the brew is either taken internally or used to wet those parts of the body closest to the afflicted area.

To prescribe curative medicine a diviner need not know the identity of the evil-doer. Diviners may have their own suspicions about people in the community, but their personal opinions are rarely asked. Consequently a diviner is unlikely to become a spokesman who once and for

all identifies the evil for the community or a segment of it. Thus, not only from the point of view of individuals but also from that of entire groups the dangers remain elusive.

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In this paper I have discussed divination as practiced by the Central Sakalava. Attention was called to factors that, being inherent to the divination system, bring about results independent of the opinions of the people involved. These factors include the various recognized causes of disease and, in the case of witchcraft or sorcery, the direction of the culprit's house with respect to that of the patient, the sex of the evil-doer, the day on which the evil act took place, and so forth. Park (1963) calls these the objective factors in divination, which he contrasts with subjective factors such as the opinions of the interrogator, the diviner, or third parties. Where Park talks about objective factors, Moore (1957) talks about the randomizing aspects of divination; I have used the latter terminology.

We have seen that Sakalava divination generates a high proportion of causative agents linked to sorcery or witchcraft. Of course, once the patient has learned that he is the victim of either sorcery or witchcraft, he will want to know the identity of the evil-doer. The randomizing aspects of the divination system are likely to produce different categories of potential candidates from one consultation to the next, ensuring that the blame will not repeatedly be fixed on the same individual(s).

Spatial coordinates play a crucial role in this process. They help divide the field of possible culprits in four portions corresponding to the cardinal directions. The cardinal direction associated with the point of origin of disease suffered by a victim varies randomly from one consultation to the next. In particular, this means that the suspicions of a victim rarely crystallize out to coincide with the residential patterns within his community. Instead, the danger remains elusive and diffuse. Under these circumstances, suspicions do not contribute to the formation of factions, a process well known from other African societies that, like the Sakalava, rely heavily on notions of witchcraft and sorcery to explain misfortune (see, for instance, Mair 1969). Thus, Sakalava divination, while providing explanations for misfortune in terms of witchcraft and sorcery, at the same time helps avoid some of the less desirable consequences often associated with such explanations.



## NOTES

1. In this paper the official Malagasy orthography is used augmented with the following symbols for sounds employed by the Sakalava but not found in the official language:

$$\ddot{n} = [\eta], \ddot{o} = [o], \ddot{e} = [\epsilon].$$

2. I conducted anthropological fieldwork in the area of Besalampy from October 5, 1972, to December 18, 1973. This work was financed in part by the National Science Foundation and in part by Rice University.

3. Here and in the remainder of this paper the term Sakalava refers to the Central Sakalava of Besalampy and surroundings.

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